Helping Young Children with Learning Disabilities at Home

By Doris Johnson

Many parents of young children with learning disabilities ask what they can do at home to help their youngsters. Generally, the first step is to try to understand the child's difficulties and to consider how these weaknesses might impact on self-help skills, communication, discipline, play and independence; however, above all we encourage them to focus on the child's strengths in order to build self-esteem and to help them become an integral part of the family. Like all parents, they need to consider the delicate balance between providing too much or too little assistance for the child - a balance between under- and over-expecting what the child can do independently.

Understanding the child's needs takes time because needs change with age and with expectations at home, in social settings, and in school. New and unexpected problems may arise as they do with all children. However, youngsters with special needs often require more understanding and support, not only from parents and teachers, but from siblings.

The early childhood years are particularly important because learning typically occurs so rapidly. Children change from almost complete dependence to relative independence in a few short years. Much of the learning during this time occurs without formal instruction; however, most parents teach their children informally as they encourage them to notice things in the environment, as they label objects, and they guide certain social skills, appropriate behaviors, and manners. Parents teach self-help skills such as dressing, buttoning, and tying. Often they teach their children how to throw a ball and ride a bike. And many parents provide the basis for early reading, writing, and mathematics skills by reading stories, reciting the alphabet, coloring, copying letters, writing simple messages, and playing counting games. Parents engage in these activities so naturally that they do not even think of them as instruction, and yet, this training, social interaction and stimulation are crucial for learning.

Some children with learning disabilities find these seemingly natural, every day skills difficult to learn, even with good stimulation. They do not profit from the experiences and guidance provided by parents, preschool teachers, and others because they have difficulty processing certain types of information. Yet children with learning disabilities are not delayed in all aspects of development. In fact, many do as well as, or better than their peers in certain areas. They have uneven patterns of development and perform below expectation in one or more areas of learning such as listening, expressive language, pre-academic skills, nonverbal behavior, and/or perceptual motor skills. It is because of these uneven profiles and unexpected weaknesses that they are somewhat difficult to understand. Their learning and behavior is less predictable than normally achieving children, and perhaps different from children who are delayed in all areas of development.

The symptoms associated with learning disabilities differ. Some children have difficulty processing auditory information while others have problems with visual tasks. Some have difficulty processing language, whereas others have problems with nonverbal skills such as interpreting facial expressions, learning to play, or dress themselves. Some have no problems until they enter school, though indications of pre-academic weaknesses may be evident.

When problems persist, parent may discuss their concerns with physicians, educators, or specialists in fields such as learning disabilities, occupational therapy, or speech/language pathology. A comprehensive evaluation which includes a developmental history, tests for mental ability, oral language, pre-academic achievement, perceptual-motor skills, various cognitive processes and behavior is helpful in order to obtain an overall profiles of strengths and weaknesses, and in order to make recommendations. Some children may be placed in a developmental class where they can receive supplemental help, whereas those with milder problems may be seen individually for assistance. In other instances, a specialist might to into the classroom or kindergarten to assist the child with those areas of learning which appear to be most difficult. Others will be placed on a *watch list* and their learning will be monitored. In certain instances, families choose private intervention, particularly if the schools do not provide services in the early childhood years.

Some specialists give parents suggestions for activities at home, depending upon the needs of the child. While we do not recommend formal lessons parents are encouraged to take advantage of their daily routines to foster the development of certain concepts and skills that appear to be weak. Whatever parents decide to do, however, should be done in the context of a social relationship that is pleasant and non-threatening. Emphasis should be given to the child's strengths, not just the weaknesses. Parents may find it difficult to help children in the areas of weakness, and some children do not like *exposing* weaknesses to their parents. Thus, there is a delicate balance to be achieved. Children should feel loved and respected irrespective of any difficulties they may have. Too much emphasis on the weaknesses can destroy that

delicate balance. Sally Smith's book (1994), *Different is Not Bad*, includes many examples to highlight individual differences. Similarly, Jill Lauren's book (1997**)** *Succeeding with LD*, contains stories from children and adults with learning disabilities who have achieved success despite their difficulties.

Because children with learning disabilities are unique, and because their strengths and weaknesses vary, parents often need help in understanding their difficulties. Indeed, many parents and teachers need to understand many of the typical behaviors of young children lest they view them as problems. Books such as *Don't Push Your Preschooler* by Ames and Chase (1980) and others based on the research of Gesell provide general guidelines and examples of behaviors that one might expect during the early childhood years. Chess and Thomas (1987) also discuss differences in temperament which parents and educators need to consider. They report that most parents can describe their child's temperament accurately (p.37), but they often need help in dealing with their behaviors. Among other guidelines, they say that if a child behaves differently than you expect, do not assume you are a *bad* parent. Nor should you assume that the child is deliberately misbehaving. However, the temperament may require some special handling.

Parents may find it helpful to read books by Betty Osman (1979), Larry Silver (1998), and others, as well as the materials prepared by the Early Childhood committee from the Learning Disabilities Association. These can be obtained by contacting the LDA National Office.

The first step always is understanding it is important to remember that the population of children with learning disabilities is heterogeneous. The children are similar because they all have adequate hearing, vision, mental ability, and many strengths, but their specific disabilities and symptoms differ. Therefore, not all of the suggestions provided below are applicable, but we begin with general recommendations.

1. Focus on the child's strengths, not the weaknesses.

Every child is unique; all can contribute to the joys of family life. Find special times and jobs that allow the child to contribute to the group.

2. Set reasonable expectations.

Try not to expect more than the child is capable of doing, but expect the best that he or she can produce, with and then without assistance. This may mean that the child will have to be taught simples skills, and that complex tasks will need to be taught step-by-step. For instance, learning how to button may begin with the last movement-just pulling the button through the buttonhole. Learning how to set the table for a meal might begin with putting a fork by each plate. Cleaning one's room may require showing which toys will fit on a particular shelf or in the correct box. Many of these skills are needed to help the child gain independence. Provide the initial assistance and then gradually reduce the supports as the child makes progress.

3. Provide the guidance needed for independence.

Many children want to be independent, long before they are capable of doing some things on their own. Parents and teachers are often ambivalent about letting children perform certain skills independently. For example, climbing the steps on a sliding board requires some degree of *sure-footedness*, as well as visual and visual motor skills. Crossing the street requires very careful visual scanning and time estimation. Some children with learning disabilities will need careful guidance and instruction in order to master these skills because of attention and processing weaknesses. Gradually the supports can be reduced so the child can perform independently.

4. Maintaining consistent discipline.

Give clear, simple explanations, particularly if children have language problems. They may not understand the vocabulary, lengthy instructions and complex sentences used at home or in school. A guideline should be firmness with warmth, together with consistency.

5. Foster intellectual curiosity.

One of our primary goals is to excite children about the learning process. Parents and teachers who enjoy learning themselves can convey such an attitude to their child. Many infants and toddlers seem to be naturally curious as they look at objects, explore them, turn them, or try to move them. By watching their eyes and hand movements, long before they can talk, children seem to be asking questions. As they sit in a high chair banging with a spoon, they become aware of the sound of metal against metal, or metal against wood. When taking a bath, they learn how to splash in the water and, if given certain toys, they may acquire the rudiments of the concept of floating and sinking. As they play with pots and pans, they learn about shapes, sizes, and the beginning of seriation, an important concept of early mathematics.

Some researchers in the field found that children with learning disabilities are inactive learners. While the basis for this inactivity is not clear, adults can develop a spirit of inquiry by guiding the child's listening and looking, by showing excitement and wonder about even simple events in the world. Some parents do this automatically. I remember seeing a mother and toddler looking intently at something on

the sidewalk and as I approached, I noticed they were studying a caterpillar. Mother was guiding the child's looking and using words such as fuzzy, crawling slowly, etc. She, like many other parents, was fostering learning, language, and intellectual curiosity. One does not have to have fancy toys to excite children. Many children can be content with a pail, a shovel, some sand and water if we guide them to see what can be done with such objects. Take a walk around the block, look at the tress and the buses, feel the bark of the tree, smell of flowers, look at the grass, the gravel, the cement and talk about what is hard, smooth, rough, and pretty. One of our goals is to provide the basis for life long learners as suggested Catlkins with Adellino (1997).

6. Help children classify and categorize objects.

Many children naturally put groups of objects together because they are the same color or shape, or because of their use. If given blocks, toy cars, cups and saucers, they notice similarities and differences, a critical skill for all learning. However, some children with learning disabilities have problems with conceptualization (Lewis, Strauss, & Lehtinen, 1960). They do not notice similarities or observe the most relevant attributes. If given groups of objects they tend to sort on the basis of an insignificant detail (e.g., they all have lines on them) or they may only be able to sort a set of blocks by color, not shape. Because categorization in such as important part of learning, we include it in most of our lessons. We guide children to note how shoes, pencils, apples, coats, and other objects are alike because words represent concepts. In order to understand apple, children must note that they can come in different colors and sizes, but they are alike in many ways. Parents can help with this categorization process when they go to grocery stores, parks, zoos and other places to note how things in certain areas are similar. The grocery bag can be used for many conceptual and language tasks. When putting things away, encourage the child to help and to note which things go in the freezer, in the refrigerator, and in cupboards. Note which things are in bottles, cartons, or cans, and call attention to foods that need to be cooked before they are eaten and which do not. The same type of classification activity can be done with the laundry, or objects in a workshop, and even in the child's own room. The important thing is to help them categorize, and reclassify objects so they become flexible thinkers. Later, we encourage them to note how words are alike.

7. Provide good language models and stimulation.

When children have delayed language, some parents tend to talk less to them. While some reduction of language may be helpful, children need good stimulation. In this book, Talk with Your Child, Wiener (1988) emphasizes the importance of informal, unstructured conversation to guide children's learning. Although his focus in on normally developing children, he said that parents should talk while they are doing things with the child to enhance vocabulary and concepts. For example, if the child wants something to eat, the parents might externalize their thinking - Let's get a banana; u, oh, this one is not ripe; it is too green. How shall we peel the banana? I can't eat the peeling. What color is the peeling? It's yellow; what color is the part that we eat? - It's white. Wiener says that when carrying on such dialogues, even if the child cannot speak, parents should wait for some types of response. This kind of social interaction strengthens the interpersonal relationship as well as verbal learning.

8. Guide the child's language comprehensive.

Many parents of children with delayed language are concerned about their lack of ability to speak or to put words together in sentences, but in reality, the first step is to make certain they understand language. We do not ask children to say words that they do not understand because they will not be able to use them for communication.

When helping children comprehend new vocabulary words, we emphasize that words are concepts. As stated above, words are not simple associations. Often normally developing children as well as those with language problems use generalizations. That is they call all liquids *juice*. Others may be overly specific; all juice is orange. Gradually, with varied experiences, their word meanings approach those of adults. However, vocabulary acquisition goes on throughout life.

It is important to remember that in English, the same object can have more than one name (e.g., rug, carpet), and the same word may have several meanings (e.g., bill, back). Many children with learning disabilities have problems understanding words with multiple meanings, particularly those that change with the context. For example, children probably first learn the word *letter* when it refers to an envelope that is sent or received in the mail. Later, however, the word *letter* will refer to a part of the alphabet. Most normally achieving children seem to abstract these word meanings more easily than those with language learning disabilities. Therefore, when children start to school, teachers and parents need to make certain they understand word meanings in new contexts, particularly the language of instruction (Johnson, 1999). We have seen many 7 and 8 year olds with learning disabilities who did not understand the terminology used in reading instruction. For example, when asked to point to a *letter* or a *word*, they were

confused. Many also have difficulty with words representing time and space (e.g., before, after, between). When this is the case, they might fail at tasks they could otherwise master if the vocabulary in the instructions were clarified. Children may have difficulty comprehending words such as *in, on, under, over,* and *between*; some comprehend these words in three dimensional, but not two-dimensional space. Simple demonstrations while saying in the box, under the box, etc may be helpful.

Many words are difficult to comprehend because the referent is not visible. Unlike words such as *table, big, or sharp*, which can be observed, abstract words are learned in context from other words. For example, a parent might say that an *honest* person tells the truth. In order to understand honest, one must understand the other words in the sentence. We try to reduce the amount and level of language so children understand new and difficult word meanings.

It may be necessary to help your child with the language of feelings. Some do not understand words such as sad, angry or embarrassed. Let your child know how *you* feel in various situations also.

9. Help the child comprehend and remember longer units of language.

Some children can comprehend single words or short phrases, but they have difficulty understanding the meaning of sentences and stories. When children have difficulty listening to stories, it is often helpful to speak slowly, to repeat phrases or sentences, and when necessary, use pictures to illustrate the meaning.

Verbal discipline may also be problematic. Make certain the vocabulary is clear and that directions are not too lengthy. Show the children what to do if they do not understand verbal instructions.

10. Do not call attention to expressive language weaknesses.

Language is first and foremost a form of communication. We recommend that parents and teachers never interrupt children's flow of thought when they are trying to communicate. In certain instances, when children cannot recall a word, it may be helpful to give a multiple-choice question, or the first sound of a word. For example, if the child is trying to recall the word *juice*, the parents might say, *Do you want juice or milk*? This type of question will allow children to use the word and to provide practice. In general, we think the parents should not correct grammar or pronunciation. Although many parents attempt to correct occasional mistakes, when problems are evident, a specialist should provide the instructions. Meanwhile, the parents should make every effort to communicate in other ways, through gesture and pantomime if necessary. Never *bribe* a child to say a word or sentence correctly. Make the verbal interactions as pleasant and meaningful as possible. Listen to children. Make certain they have opportunities to contribute to family decisions.

11. Engage the child in early literacy activities.

Literacy refers to many oral language, reading, and writing activities, all of which are intertwined. Reading to children strengthens oral language and introduces them to various forms of discourse such as stories, fairy tales, and poetry. Readings signs, labels, or thank you notes helps them understand relationships between oral and written language and emphasizes meaning. Sometimes, children with language disorders do not like being read to because they cannot process all of the information. In these cases, we suggest that parents read the pictures and reduce the language level so that the child comprehends. Wiener (1988) recommends extensive reading of pictures to build vocabulary, descriptive language, and the basis for simple narratives. From a single action picture (e.g., a child eating soup or cereal), one can ask countless questions about the objects, the actions, how things might taste, whether the soup is hot, the kinds of soup the child does or does not like, as well as simple inferential questions. Studies of older students with reading comprehension problems indicate they have difficulty answering inferential questions. Therefore, we introduce such questions in the early childhood years. For example, *Do you think this boy likes the cereal? How do you know? Look at this face.* While reading, we also suggest that parents stop periodically and ask the child questions about the story.

Sometimes it is helpful for the parent and child to take turns asking questions about the content. This type of interaction also provides the basis for self-questioning later when children read to themselves.

We strongly recommend the use of logos and signs for early reading activities. Groceries can be used for many purposes including the reading of labels. When looking at a can or carton of food, one might ask, *Which word do you think says milk?* Encourage the child to read signs such as *stop, exit* and words on doors such as *boys, girls, push*, etc.

The primary goal is to make certain that children understand that reading is a meaningful act. It is not learning the alphabet. Although studies indicate that learning letter names predicts early reading, in some instances, we focus on the sounds of the letters rather than the names since the letter names do not really aide the reading process per se. Furthermore, remembering 26 nonmeaningful figures may be too difficult for some children.

Several studies in recent years have found that phonemic awareness is related to early reading. Therefore, we encourage parents to play listening games in which they encourage children to identify objects that begin or end with a particular sound (i.e.,

Let's find all the things that start with m, using the letter sound not the letter name). Blending is often difficult for poor readers so we ask children to *point to the picture that goes with what I say - M - A - N.* It is usually easier for children to recognize the object than to say or blend the sounds themselves, but both activities are beneficial. Rhyming games are also encouraged. Sometimes negative examples strengthen phonemic awareness. For example on might say *Throw me the 'pall'* and note whether the child detects the mistake.

In order to strengthen visual processes and whole word recognition we suggest that when parents ready to children, they ask them to find letters or words that look the same. For an independent activity, we suggest the parent cut out a page from an old magazine or page of print and ask the children to circle words that look the same. Parents might highlight a high frequency word such as *the*, and ask the child to find others that look the same.

Early writing is also an important part of literacy. By age 3, most children can draw a circle; by four they can draw a square, and by five they can draw a triangle as well as the rudiments of many letters and numerals. They also draw pictures of people houses, and simple objects. Many preschoolers enjoy *pretend writing*, which is an important part of development. If one analyzes their scribbles carefully, it is possible to see word-like strings of figures and drawings interspersed with letters. All of these activities should be encourage. Do not try to achieve perfect copying or production of letters and numbers. Rather, let the child engage in writing as a communication act. When children *can* copy letters, however, we use the opportunities that arise from going shopping. Encourage children to help write the grocery list by copying one or two words from empty cartons and boxes. Not only will children feel helpful, but they will begin to realize that writing is an aid to memory - one of the important functions of writing. Invented spelling is also encouraged as a part of meaningful writing. When a child writes *ILVU* (I love you) on a note, be aware that this is good developmental spelling. The child is beginning to identify certain sounds and associating them with letters.

Many young children with learning disabilities have significant problems with visual-motor integration. Some do not know how to hold a pencil or draw the simplest figures. In these cases an occupational therapist or specialist in learning disabilities may be needed. Parent can, however, assist by having children draw figures in sand, make designs with finger paint, etc. Often we suggest that parents purchase or make templates (stencils) from cardboard or styrofoam so the child can trace inside the boundaries. Make basic shapes and simple outlines of figures such as apples, a kite, or a fish. As children trace around the boundaries of the figures, they learn the motor patterns and, when the stencil is removed, they see a product that is better than one they can produce from copy.

12. Encourage early mathematics and number activities.

Introduce mathematics as a meaningful, pleasurable activity, not a rote memory skill. While most parents play simple counting games and sing number songs (all of which are helpful), we also recommend activities, which strengthen the language of mathematics and one-to-one correspondence. Some children with learning disabilities have difficulty counting systematically; others have difficulty with words such as *more, less, few* and other relational terms. Encourage children to help estimate, measure, pour water or milk, not only to learn some of the quantitative terms, but to help them acquire certain visual-spatial-motor skills.

Simple games with dominoes can be used to match quantities, to strengthen counting skills and one-to-one correspondence. When reading to children, have them note the numbers of the pages and say them. Some youngsters learn to count, but they do not learn how to read numerals.

Seriation (ordering objects according to size) is an important aspect of mathematics which parents can encourage. When children are given pots and pans of various sizes to stack in order, they are learning the rudiments of seriation. When they stack various size rings on a peg they also learn about the smallest and largest figures.

Simple problem solving can begin with activities such as setting the table. *How many more forks do we need? Do we have enough spoons?* These same types of activities can be used when playing games - *Do we have enough players, cards?* etc. Many simple board games with dice are excellent ways of teaching counting, one-to-one correspondence, and turn taking.

13. Help the child learn to play.

Some learning disabilities interfere with a child's ability to play and acquire social skills. One does not usually think about having to teach children how to play, yet consider the visual-spatial, language, and symbolic skills that are needed to play with blocks, a doll house, trucks and cars in garages, making sand castles, etc. While we do not want to make *work* out of play, in order for children to play unsupervised or to participate in groups, adults may need to show them how to stack blocks so they do not fall, to pretend, to dig in the sand, and to play simple games. We can prepare them for group activities by teaching the subskills in advance.

Throughout all of these activities, take time to enjoy the children and have fun. Laugh at incongruous situations, and allow for the learner's leeway. Everyone makes mistakes and we can learn from them.

14. Consider the importance of nonverbal communication for social skills.

Certain children with nonverbal learning disabilities have problems interpreting or using appropriate body language including facial expressions and gestures. Others have difficulty interpreting tone of voice. As a result, their social skills may be less than adequate. Play games in which you imitate various body movements, facial expressions and intonations. As you look at pictures note the faces and see if the child can tell which people are angry, happy, or sad. If problems persist, the special education team may provide support and social skills training.

15. Encourage children to listen to music and to develop a sense of rhythm.

Musical skills may come easily for some children with learning disabilities, in which case it can be used as a way to teach certain early reading skills such as rhyming. We often use songs the child knows (e.g., *Happy Birthday*) as a way in to reading.

Other children need help in listening to rhythm, beat, and tempo so they can participate in group activities. In these cases, we encourage parents to clap or march with the children in time to the music.

16. Teach simple time concepts.

Many students with learning disabilities have problems understanding the language of time, the calendar, saying days of the week, months of the year, telling time, and estimating time. Therefore, we recommend work in this area at many age levels. During the early childhood years, words such *as early, later, today, tomorrow,* etc. can be emphasized. Mark school days on a calendar with a special color, and perhaps keep simple weather journals illustrating sunny or rainy days with simple drawings of a sun or raindrops.

17. Provide structure for children with attention problems.

Some, but not all, children with learning disabilities have problems focusing and maintaining attention. In these cases, we recommend structure, reduction of stimulation in the environment, and quiet, but firm discipline. The goal is not to punish, but to create an environment in which the children can succeed. Children may need help with organization, in which case it helps to break down complex tasks and master the sequence of activities. Develop each sub-skill to achieve automatically. Create situations where parents and teachers can say *Good Work!*

18. Summary

Children with special needs often have special gifts - gifts such as sensitivity, perseverance, tenacity, and resilience. These gifts are far more important than perfect recitation of the alphabet or copying letters. All children can make progress, but the rate and amount of improvement varies. Try to build on the child's strengths in order to foster self-respect. Help the child realize the value of people in all walks life as you go about daily routines. There is a place for everyone.

When things do not seem to go as well as expected, it is often helpful to contact teachers, physicians and other specialists for suggestions. Parents need time out and opportunities to talk with parents of children with similar problems. Many communities have support groups that may be beneficial. Parents learn from each other and can share strategies that are most helpful.

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